

Amidst cutbacks in mental health, California hospital faces closure

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The Sonoma Developmental Center in northern California—an institution with over 100 years of history caring for people with developmental disabilities—is being threatened with permanent closure. Aggressive and politically-motivated inspections of the SDC are being utilized to the attempt to establish a case that, due to deteriorating conditions in the center, state funding should be cut off entirely.

The drive to shut down the SDC is one part of a broader austerity agenda in the state, now spearheaded by the Democratic Party administration of Governor Jerry Brown, that includes hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to mental health services and assistance for developmental disabilities. In 2011 alone, California saw its mental health budget cut by \$831 million, with \$567 million cut from developmental disabilities programs.

The WSWS spoke with an employee at the SDC, who asked that his name be withheld for security reasons. The SDC employee described suspicious changes from the previous inspection process.

“Every year we’re required to have two surveys to ensure we meet the requirements for Medicare funding. For the intermediate care survey they usually come around June 10 and stay for about 2 weeks. This time they stayed for the whole month.”

The experiences of the SDC employee indicate that the inspectors arrived with preexisting intention to make a case against the center:

“This time it was clear that the inspectors were under political pressure to find something wrong. They’ve been chipping away at us with each budget. We’re running well below our full complement of staff, and that affects our work. This is the end result of [former California governor and later president Ronald] Reagan’s policies, which have been carried out by

every administration since then. To the extent that the survey reflects actual problems, it shows the result of systematic under-funding and neglect by the state.”

Recent allegations of abuse by employees at the SDC are now being used to make the case for shutting down the facility. Reports have surfaced of sexual harassment and the use of tasers against residents. The rumors of abuse have become part of a broader strategy aimed at discrediting public services, according the SDC employee.

“It’s exactly the same thing as what they’re doing with the schools. You can find a few bad employees at any job, but when a banker breaks the law they say it’s just a few bad apples.”

If the SDC is shut down, near-by communities will come under strain as they attempt to deal with the fallout. Hundreds of Californians who require a stable environment and the attention of skilled personnel will be sent to group homes, with many ending up on the street and in the hands of the police. At the same time, Brown’s budget includes \$413 million in cuts to the Home Support Services Program, which provides support for families caring for the disabled.

“We’ve got about 530 people who live here,” said the SDC worker. “There’s been this drive and push to place them into community settings, but the people here are generally unable due to behavioral and medical issues. If we close they will push them into community homes where they would try to recreate our services here on the local level, but that’s not really possible.”

Overall, conditions are deteriorating in California, producing a serious health and social crisis. With the official unemployment rate at 11 percent, and youth unemployment above 20 percent, ever larger swathes of the population are excluded from meaningful participation in the economy, rendering them more

vulnerable to illness. Without proper care, many mentally ill individuals will end up in prison, where their condition is sure to deteriorate further.

“If a client crashes out of these homes, the next line of response is the police. They’d end up in jail or worse. We also have a couple thousand employees that would be out of work. The local communities would be hit very hard by that loss. I think we provide very good care here and hope we can continue to do so.”

Beyond California, mental health programs are under attack across the United States. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Illinois, for example, has reduced its mental health services by 31 percent since 2008. Six out of Illinois’ twelve mental health facilities are slated for closure. Cuts at the state level have been driven by state budget deficits, overseen by the Obama administration, with governors of both big business parties rejecting any increase in taxes on the wealthy to fund social programs.

At the national level, both presidential candidates are committed to sweeping cuts in medical programs. Cuts to Medicare deriving from the Obama administration’s Affordable Care Act may result in the closing down of 15 percent of the nation’s hospitals.

The crisis of global capitalism is driving the attack on vital social infrastructure, which are seen as a drag on profitability by the corporate elite. The drive to shut down SDC, along with the general attack on mental health care, is one more example of the way in which the ruling class, in response to the capitalist crisis, is seeking to force the most vulnerable sections of the population to foot the bill.



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